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The Power of Stories: An Interview with Hugo Hamilton*

In July 2019, the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures held its annual conference in Trinity College Dublin, where Hugo Hamilton was invited, among a panel of writers including Carlo Gébler, Caitriona Lally, and Kevin Power. Hugo Hamilton has received international acclaim for his memoir The Speckled People *(2003), about his Irish-German childhood in English-speaking Dublin. A number of his books, from his earlier short story collection* Dublin Where the Palm Trees Grow *(1996) to the novels* Disguise *(2008), set in post-war Germany, or* Hand in the Fire *(2010), set in contemporary Ireland, deal with memory, belonging, and borders. We met at the public library in Dún Laoghaire later to discuss his newest novel,* Dublin Palms *(2019), which picks up on these themes.*

Audrey Robitaillié: Let's start by talking about your new book, *Dublin Palms*. Could you tell me about the novel and how you would describe it?

Hugo Hamilton: It's going back to the source of my difficulty with the world, which is primarily with language. It was such a formative sense of dislocation that it sort of cast a shadow on my life, basically. I describe it in the book as a silence. Silence affects the narrator in very many ways. One of them is that he has an unexplained medical condition which presents in his teeth. He feels strong pain in his teeth. So the plot of the book really is: how is he going to explain that silence and how is he going to emerge from that silence?

AR: There was this idea of silence in *Disguise* as well. There are interesting descriptions of how, why the narrator is silent and the trapdoor that he has fallen into. So that idea of silence seems to be running through your books.

HH: It's there, and always there. I describe it, not as an absence of matter, not like a space vacuum. It's actually something that is full of stuff, full of memory, full of love, full of anguish, full of uncertainty. Silence is this sort of large piece of life.

AR: You are giving the positive definition of silence, instead of it being "not" speaking. It's not speaking to express all the other things that we don't communicate with words.

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* My heartfelt thanks to Hugo Hamilton for his kindness and for giving me his time on a lovely summer day.

HH: Yes. I had the difficulty of the three languages to negotiate, but language is also about finding listeners and finding a way of communicating. That, I think, is where any language is so inaccurate and so inadequate sometimes. He feels that inadequacy in his life and he needs to find ultimately another way of dealing with that silence, which is to become a writer. It's the only way that he can successfully put down what his thoughts are.

AR: And do you feel that reflects your situation as well?

HH: Absolutely. I mean, in *The Speckled People*, I describe – my mother describes that there are certain things you can say to another person, but they are nothing like the things you can say in writing, what you can put down in a diary, what you can put down in a book. That's through a different place altogether, because it stands to reason that with the person in the room, they can just nod and that's enough acknowledgement, but a writer, somebody writing something down, has an imaginary listener, which is a much more powerful way of engaging with the world.

AR: Do you think the way you view language is as something that can't always convey what you want to say? Is that because you have three languages? Can we only figure this out when we have been out of our language?

HH: Yes. You probably understand that, coming from France and making yourself understood in English. There would be certain ways of thinking. Not just linguistically, but also certain ways of looking at the world which come from your place of origin. They don't always chime with the people you are trying to express the world to. That's my experience. I was looking at Ireland from the viewpoint of my German mother, you know: trying to speak to people in pubs, when I was a young man, with absolute truth, which is what my mother taught me to do, how she taught me to behave. Never tell a lie. And that was bad advice for living in Ireland! Because there are these wonderful literary skills that people have for detouring around. It's not like they are untruthful, but the truth is too harsh. Irish people have this great way of negotiating their way around it.

AR: I've got to learn this over the years: in Ireland when you ask something like "Would you like a cup of tea?", you have to ask three times before Irish people will actually tell you the real answer!

HH: Exactly.

AR: So now I make a joke about it: "Do I have to ask three times or is this really your answer?".

HH: That's also very common of Irish people, when you ask someone a critical question, they will ask you another question in return. "Why would you want to know this?" There are all kinds of language negotiation going on in a conversation. I know this happens in other countries as well, not just talking about Ireland. But the conventions of communication would be so much different in Germany. They would also be different in the Irish language. So I was constantly left wrong-footed. You know, the trapdoor as you described in *Disguise*. It's always there for me.

AR: So why did you choose to write in English? Because you were giving yourself an extra challenge since it wasn't your mother tongue?

HH: I found German –

AR: Didn't you write one book in German, *Die Redselige Insel: Irisches Tagebuch* (2007)?

HH: No, that was written in English as well and it was translated into German. I just didn't publish it in English yet. But the strange thing about language I discovered is… in *The Speckled People* I describe the infant negotiating the language and trying to understand what his mother, what his father is saying, what is being said outside and trying to reconcile all those things. The adult version is mostly the same thing. But it's also negotiating feelings and how the world impacts on him and how difficult that is to communicate to anybody. So in a way that kind of failure of language, failure of communication is still pretty much a thing that is oppressing him.

AR: In *Dublin Palms*, you talk about Irish without talking about Irish, calling it "the ghost language". Why did you choose to use those words?

HH: Because that is part of his nature [the narrator and main character's]. He has a ghostly part inside himself. He has this language that he grew up in and there's nobody to talk to. It doesn't leave him any room to communicate.

AR: This new book has been called a "fictional memoir". How much of it is fiction and how much of it is memoir?

HH: That's what I was saying, it's a fictional story around a very real event. There's a real family at the source of this, but this is a fictional account of that. There's a lot of talk around fictional memoir, where the borderlines are. I think in a lot of ways all of writing, anything to do with memory is a sort of reconstruction and has a sort of fictional element to it.

AR: And a sort of personal element to it as well?

HH: Yeah.

AR: You write about characters who are crossing borders, who are migrants or travellers. I wanted to know what interests you in these characters that move across borders and languages and cultures.

HH: They are, in a sense, the most interesting people now. They were in a lot of ways shunned for a long time and still are. There's something not quite pure, not to be trusted, in people who come from lots of different areas. But that's my experience from childhood on, as I describe it, as this daily migration onto the street, where I didn't belong to this country outside. That fascinates me. You hear migrants talking about going to live in other places and still having a border in their heads. That's the experience of a lot of people now.

AR: You are in two places, but in no place at the same time.

HH: In this book *Dublin Palms*, I describe the character as saying that he doesn't quite consent to the place where he is standing. So his mind is in Germany, his feet are in Ireland and there's some of part of him also out in the West in this shadow or ghostly place.

AR: How important are places and landscapes for your writing?

HH: For me, the landscape was never as important as the language.

AR: But aren't they linked?

HH: They are. But, I mean, when you go to Berlin, it's a different country, but it's not necessarily the streets of Berlin, it's more the language and the positioning in terms of the rest of the world and how, if you grow up in Berlin, you see the world from that point of view. You grew up in France, you see the world from that point of view, from that sense of history. I've always seen it from the point of view of Irish history and Ireland, and then I shift to seeing the world from a totally different location. It's these multiple viewpoints.

AR: It's the culture that goes with the place that is more important than the place itself.

HH: It's the cultural belonging, or cultural unbelonging.

AR: So nowadays, what do you think is the importance of talking about these characters that belong and don't belong, and cross the borders, and are trying to belong? Why is it important to write about them and to talk about that?

HH: I think it has been my life work, basically, to describe those people between different places, the people who have lost their sense of belonging. This kind of uncomfortable place. I often describe the idea of home, and even belonging, as a fabrication. I'm sure I'm not the only person to say this, but I think there's this idea of fabrication around people's lives and where they belong. Fabrication may be too strong a word. It's a construction, it's this story you tell about yourself. Here, I could call myself German, or Irish, or somewhere in-between. But it is ultimately a construction.

AR: What's interesting in writing about these stories?

HH: Well, it is the effort to try and explain that to myself. I was talking to Carlo [Gébler] before we went into the event last night about the Irish difficulty with feelings, expressing feelings. They have no skill whatsoever at expressing their feelings. It's almost like it's dangerous to do that.

AR: Yet they are very good at writing about them.

HH: They are good at writing about them, but in a public place, feelings are not very welcome. Your honest opinion is not very welcome. I do remember people shying away from me, walking away from me in my early twenties, because I spoke

in a language – I describe this in the book as well – that you would more likely find in a letter. It was almost this slight formality and this slight intimacy that was uncalled for in public places. People were afraid of it.

AR: That's happened to me as well. People were asking me what I thought of their shoes or whatever. So I did say "No, I don't like your shoes". They were surprised: "Oh, you tell it like it is!". That must be a continental thing?

HH: It is. I think you would have that in France as well. Why tell a lie? But in Ireland, people just go over the top to please other people. I'm not saying that it's wrong.

AR: It's an interesting cultural contrast. Learning a language won't tell you all these things. You have to have lived in these places and made these mistakes to figure all that out.

AR: Have you passed on your languages to your children and grandchildren?

HH: Some of them. They all speak various languages, now. Some speak Spanish, some speak German. I have a son living in Germany, so he is fluent in German. But I didn't force any languages on them, they were free. The language of the house is English. So that's how they grew up, obviously I didn't want to go back and repeat the crusade that my father had about language.

AR: You didn't want to use several languages at the same time?

HH: No, I wanted to be secure in one language and wanted them to be secure in one language.

AR: What is it like to change your name? What goes through your mind when you do that? That must be a big choice to make, right?

HH: Yeah, it was the idea of claiming an identity for myself. I think part of my story is… Not just me, but other children have their identity foisted on them. They grow up in a certain way or in a certain mind frame imposed on them by their parents. It sometimes used to be religion, it used to be the language, the cultural values. Now it's probably a little different. I think that's what was so important for me as a young person: to claim my own identity. In *Dublin Palms*, I do describe how much of an effort I had to make to undo my parents. I had to be unlike my father: the effort that it took was quite significant. It strikes me that for my generation, that's what we had to do. We spent so much time undoing these strict Catholic mentalities for example, the strict nationalist ways of thinking. There was so much to be undone right across the world. In the 1960s and 1970s, that kind of hippy explosion of cultural change in all of the arts was this work of undoing, not just the generation of the war and all that, all that happened there, but you had to undo all these influences in ourselves before the world could move on. We are much freer now to create.

AR: It's the idea of change and being different. And did you know that there is a Swedish Hugo Hamilton, of Scottish ancestry, who was in the army in the 17th century?

HH: That's right, he comes up on the Internet.

AR: I thought that was an interesting coincidence. His middle name is Johann. That was your first name, wasn't it?

HH: Johannes. That's right!

AR: On the topic of change… You were saying yesterday that the current context is changing how we use words. Some words are taboo. I was wondering what you are feeling and thinking about Brexit and the idea of borders, and walls?

HH: It's completely insane. It's almost like my childhood coming back! That you would have people creating this cordoned, separatist place. It doesn't make sense that you want to undo it all, cut away from the global world, retreat from it and barricade yourself in, like Britain now wants to do. It's such a regressive move. It's like, to come back to my father, thinking that, culturally, you can protect yourself. You can, of course, support a cultural industry in a language or in a particular country, but you can't protect it. France is trying to do that too, trying to protect the French language. It doesn't work. Protection doesn't actually produce anything. It creates an unwanted repressive way of thinking.

AR: Why do you think people are going back to these ways?

HH: I think there is a definite fear of the global world, the fear of losing identity, losing your place of origin. This is as much to do with the technology that we are living in. We are experiencing an explosion of loneliness, of people not feeling at home. That can be exploited so easily by populist rhetoric. They can make people feel even more uncomfortable and blame migrants for all that. The whole business of hatred and racism is thriving now, because people do have an underlying fear of not belonging. But that's being exploited by the worst people in the world. I mean, you read how Donald Trump is actually using racism to promote his candidacy for the next election. Racism is what's going to get him into power again. It's the same with Boris Johnson. Because there are people who listen to the sound of it, they seem to feel protected when they can hate other people, they feel safer when they can hate other people.

AR: I think that's why it's also important to talk about what it's like to be a migrant, what it's like to be a foreigner somewhere, and get people thinking and relating to others in that way as well, so that we don't get to these extremes.

HH: It's funny the whole thing about migrants. There are people in the world who are easy to love, and people who are not easy to love. For instance, it's not easy to love Palestinians, because they have no voice, they don't have a kind of coolness, they are rejected people. Migrants in general, they are not easy to love, because…

AR: Because you are not given ways to connect with them.

HH: That's right. Irish people are very easy to love at the moment, because they have a great reputation for drinking and having good fun. So we are lucky, the Irish

are lucky in that sense. But, definitely, that is the problem. You know, there are certain people who are just not easy to love. They don't feel welcome, they don't have a voice, nobody speaks up for them.

AR: Decades ago, Irish people maybe weren't easy to love, but now they are, because they have been given a voice and we have been given ways to love them.

HH: That's interesting: if you look at Irish people in Britain in the 1960s, possibly 1970s, you saw signs all around England saying "No Irish, No Blacks". The Irish were not loved in England at all. Then the boom years came, and suddenly Irish people were doing very well in Britain, were very famous. We had international cultural acts that raised the status of Irish people, like U2. Irish people were suddenly cool, and *were* loved in England. Now it's all changed again. Suddenly because of Brexit, they are now blaming Irish people for causing the problem. It's our fault that they have such difficulty leaving the European Union. I've met people who have moved back to Ireland because they are now feeling despised in England. It keeps shifting.

AR: You briefly mention the situation in the North in *Dublin Palms*, how do you feel about the situation at the moment?

HH: It's there as a subtext in the book. It's like every day we woke up and listened to the news and there was a new horror story unfolding in the North. Ireland is immensely lucky that it is in the European Union and that it cut out from America and eventually from Britain to create this agreement. The peace in Northern Ireland is very fragile. I think Boris Johnson getting into power is the worst thing. He's absolutely reckless, he's the guy who smashes out the pub at the end of the night… he can do untold damage.

AR: Is this motif of listening to the news in the morning in *Dublin Palms* something that was happening in your house when you were growing up as well?

HH: Yes. Our relationship to the news has changed in a lot of ways. When I grew up, the news was on every morning at nine o'clock. It was on again at lunchtime at one o'clock, on at six o'clock, on again at nine o'clock in the evening. I found myself doing the same thing when I'd had my own family. "Oh yeah, the news is on, great, it's one o'clock, put it on!" It's almost as if you were tied to the misery of the world, and the kind of shocking catastrophe that was happening in the north of Ireland. Now I tend to switch off, I don't listen to the news constantly, I choose the moment. Because of the way technology is now, you can choose the moment to take all that in.

AR: What interests you in all the stories about remembering? *Disguise* is all about the memories of the character of Gregor. *Every Single Minute* (2014) is written in memory of Nuala Ó Faoláin. In *Hand in the Fire*, Vid pretends he doesn't remember anything about home. So what is interesting about what we remember, or don't remember, or choose to remember or to forget?

HH: That's part of how I describe things in a literary sense, and how I construct my characters. They are in some way exposed to memory. They are in some ways the custodians of their memory, but they are also at the mercy of their memory. It is how people select and deselect their memory which makes them the person they are. I know people whose memory is terrible, but they seem to make a laugh of it. They have this way of protecting themselves by turning everything they remember into very funny stories. Other people see the sadness, or the darkness, in it. There are different ways of dealing with memory.

AR: What is the connection between memory and belonging?

HH: Ultimately, it is that attempt to belong, or not to belong, which is often the case. Memory is so much associated with place, and a sense of place. Your home, where you grew up, all those things, the places you have been. But that is also the construction of the individual. The memory that you have extracted from different places and different people… I mean, if you talked to psychologists, if you were exposed to all of your memory on an on-going basis, you'd go completely mad. That's how they describe people who have this extraordinary gift of memory, who can remember everything, as people on the verge of madness. So we have this way of selecting memory to protect us, and also to create the individual that we are.

AR: It is interesting because we were talking about people protecting themselves earlier, and now we are talking about this other way of protecting ourselves…

HH: It's a very formative thing in my experience. You know, memory was imposed on me, or you inherit a certain amount of memory from your parents, you are open to what they tell you. It's only when you grow up that you begin to ask questions. But you receive everything that they tell you, you actually become that memory. You take on the persona that your parents were or the people that you lived with.

AR: What about history then?

HH: History is a very big part of that. The collective memory is something that you take up too. I mean, it's impossible to deny memory, it's impossible to deny history. For me, for example, I came to various points in my life where I could have said "OK, I'm Irish, I'm not German, that history has nothing to do with me. I don't feel connected, I don't feel responsible for that history". It's not possible to do that, is it?

AR: History is important. When we were talking about people who want to protect themselves and hate others because they feel protected, these people have forgotten history. Because if they remembered history, they wouldn't be doing that. So memory protects you, but harms as well.

HH: You know, people in the Brexit party in Britain claiming that leaving the European Union for the British is like an emancipation from slavery… they have nothing to do with slavery, they have completely forgotten that they invented slavery.

AR: They have chosen to forget that fact of their collective history, to create that other memory in order to protect themselves, or to pretend they are protecting themselves.

AR: On the importance of personal stories. How do the personal stories that you tell about these characters in search of themselves and of their personal narratives fit in the more global, collective stories?

HH: This is the way a novelist works. He describes the way things are going on in a particular character's life, and the world is there in the background. It's one way of describing the world. I suppose in this book, *Dublin Palms*, all the characters in this book are displaced, they all feel a sense of dislocation. The character of Helen is possibly the most interesting because she is living in Ireland and has a mother who emigrated to Canada. She talks to her mother on the phone and by talking to her mother, she is able to be completely in charge of describing the place and the world that she is living in.

AR: She is the one telling the story.

HH: She is the one telling the story, and she can make it up! She can say, "It's good" or "It's bad", and she enhances the world. He [the narrator and main character] finds himself listening to her on the phone and his world is entirely enhanced out of proportion, because it is being told to somebody in Ontario. That seems to me very much like where we are at in the world, we are telling somebody far away the conditions we are living in. What I would say ultimately about it is that there's a wonderful falsehood in everybody's life that allows us to create the world, really. We are not entirely at the mercy of the physical world, and of the events that happen to us. We are still in charge of the story. Some people have much more skill than others, but life is about the skill of being able to fabricate that life.

AR: That sense of empowerment that you get from being the one who tells the story, and finding your voice as we were talking about earlier, for those who don't have a voice yet, from whom we don't hear the stories.

AR: Trees. In *Disguise*, I like these moments when Gregor is walking in the forest and how you describe the woods around him. Then you have the palm trees of the short story collection and of your latest book. What is it about the trees?

HH: Gregor walking through the forest is about that sort of ancient connection with the country that he lives in. He wants that connection. It's a physical connection, being surrounded by trees.

AR: The palm trees are also about the idea of connecting.

HH: It is these particular trees, they are everywhere around here, they are a feature of our landscape, but they almost look like they don't really belong. They make the place look like California! We like the look of them, but they are not quite, they are not truly Irish. They seem completely out of context on a wet and miserable day…

AR: Yet, they are part of the stories now.

HH: They are part of the story now, yes.

AR: That makes them belong, in a way.

HH: I was walking in Romania, about a month ago. For part of the walk, we spent over an hour walking through a beech forest. It's an extraordinary thing, you know… it's just nothing but beech trees, and it's an original forest! I felt really at home there. It's the most interesting, the most grounded thing I've done in years.

AR: There's something about trees, the idea that they are rooted somewhere, but at the same time they grow branches, they reach out to others.

HH: They talk about trees in a different way, about them being connected through their roots, that they warn each other, that they have a collective – Do trees think? They do have some form of communication.

AR: I don't know if you have seen these pictures, but looking up, for some of them their branches don't touch: you get mosaics through their branches, you see the sky through little cracks where the branches don't touch between the different trees. So some of them will communicate with others and some of them will stay at a distance, it is a bit like people in a way.

AR: Last question: if you were a word, which word would you be?

HH: I suppose, a story. That's the only way of describing myself.

Dún Laoghaire, 23 July 2019

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